

# Nietzsche on Film

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## Abstract:

This article tracks the many appearances of Friedrich Nietzsche throughout the history of cinema. It asks how cinema can do Nietzschean philosophy in ways that are unique to the medium. It also asks why the cinematic medium might be so pertinent to Nietzschean philosophy. Adhering to the implicit premise that, as Jacques Derrida once put it, 'there is no totality to Nietzsche's text, not even a fragmentary or aphoristic one,' the essay's mode of argument avoids reductive totalization and instead comprises a playful sampling of variously Nietzschean manifestations across dissimilar films. It begins with an extended account of *Baby Face*, a 1933 drama from which the abundant references to Nietzsche were either altered or expunged ahead of theatrical release. It then maps some of the philosophical consistencies across two genres in which characters read Nietzsche with apparent frequency: the comedy and the thriller. While comedies and thrillers both treat Nietzsche and his readers with suspicion, and do so for perceptive historical reasons, the essay then asks what an affirmatively Nietzschean film might look like. It explores this possibility through a discussion of cinematic animation in general and then more specifically via several critically familiar films that self-consciously evolve their aesthetic through Nietzsche's philosophy. The essay concludes by affirming Béla Tarr's final film as one of the medium's greatest realizations of a Nietzschean film-philosophy. *The Turin Horse*, released in 2011, is exemplary because it takes Nietzsche as a narrative premise only to sublate that premise into a unique visual style.

**Keywords:** Friedrich Nietzsche; Barbara Stanwyck; Béla Tarr; Animation

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**Lily Powers: The First Overwoman**

Our story begins in Erie, Pennsylvania, during the Prohibition. A young woman, Lily Powers, works tables at her father's speakeasy, where she is pimped out to the male clientele and the police inspectors. When an exploding still kills her father she is advised by an old friend to hop a freight train for New York City. Having arrived, Lily sleeps her way to the top of Gotham Trust, a conglomerate bank modelled clearly on that of J. P. Morgan. She advances up the ranks from the filing department, into mortgages, and into accounting, until an affair with Ned Stevens – a young executive engaged to the daughter of the bank's first vice president, J. P. Carter – nearly sees her out of a job. But she seduces J. P., who then installs her in a lavish apartment until masculine jealousy for Lily's affection leads to a murder and then a suicide. Stevens shoots his potential father-in-law, Carter, and then turns the gun on himself. With grim resolve, Lily engineers a clean break from these entanglements by playing the victim and using her now scandalous diary to blackmail the firm into sending her to France. Having established herself in Paris, Lily becomes the focus of at least one more banker's desire and affection. Courtland Trenholm, an ex-playboy appointed to amend the bank's mismanagement, is likewise seduced and soon marries Lily. But, when she refuses to provide a seven-figure bailout for Gotham Trust, he also attempts suicide. The story ends with his and her fate left uncertain.

This fable of anti-capitalist sabotage through female sexuality should be familiar to pre-Code film enthusiasts, for it is the plot of *Baby Face*, a 1933 sex romp directed by Alfred E. Green and starring a young Barbara Stanwyck as Lily. This film gives exceptionally powerful voice to what Gwendolyn Audrey Foster describes as 'the trauma implicit in the modernist paradigm, a trauma steeped in economic strife, classism, sexism, ageism, and the perils of class-passing, set against the two-sided backdrop of squalor versus luxury and glamor' (2006, p. 100). More infamously, however, it was also instrumental for the introduction of the Hays Code, despite having been subject to multiple censorious edits. Indeed, numerous sexually suggestive moments had already been replaced by the scarcely sanitizing visual metaphor of a tilt-shot looking up the shaft of an office tower accompanied by that smuttiest of all soundtrack instruments: a tenor saxophone, jamming out on the 'Saint Louis Blues.' Though it has always been easy enough to sublimate sex into the visual grammar of film – which is resoundingly evident with those saxophonous tilt-shots – what remains unique to this film's censorship is the wholesale removal of Lily Powers' motivations. Specifically, this film provides a rare instance in which we encounter the excision not only of a character's apparently deplorable actions but also of their guiding philosophy.

One vital scene, which takes place immediately after the funeral for Lily's abusive father and just before she hightails it to the city, was altered prior to release. It opens with an extreme close-up on the creased spine of a leather-bound book held vertically before the camera. Everything but the book is blurred. The name of the author and the title of the tome are unmistakably clear. In capital letters, beneath a horizontal line, and reading almost luminously against the greys and blacks behind them: NIETZSCHE and an inch below that WILL TO POWER. The book is a collection of Nietzsche's unpublished notes, edited together and released posthumously by his sister, Elisabeth. Rather than have the camera pull back it holds still and the book is lowered away, rotated leftward, and opened. Cut to a new shot. The reader is Lily's friend, the cobbler, framed side-on as he smokes a pipe and flips through the book's pages. He looks like its author. The camera arcs left just as Lily enters the room, so as to capture her face with an over-the-shoulder shot when she sits in front of her friend, looking up at him. The framing and the blocking are as important as the dialogue. They suggest an imbalance of power worked out along the lines of gender, with the self-assuredly learned man looking down on the apparently hapless woman, but it is an imbalance that the actors' performance will swiftly and impressively overturn.

'So,' she says, 'that's that.' The two discuss her frankly miserable prospects in Erie before the cobbler, in a thick German accent, chides her as an unmotivated coward and then shouts through an exhortative monologue, which in the uncensored version includes these words:

A woman young, beautiful like you can get anything she wants in the world, because you have power over men. But you must use men, not let them use you. You must be a master, not a slave. Look! Here! Nietzsche says: 'All life, no matter how we idealize it, is nothing more nor less than exploitation.' That's what I'm telling you! Exploit yourself! Go to some big city where you will find opportunities! Use men! Be strong! Defiant! Use men – to get the things you want!

Though the speech's delivery features shots from multiple perspectives, its conclusion returns us to where it began, with the camera tilted downward over the cobbler's shoulder, framing Lily as the more diminutive of the pair. The apparent slave to his master. There is a long and pensive pause in which she looks down and back up again without moving anything but her eyes. Then just one syllable, pronounced slowly. 'Yeah,' says Lily. We can just about feel the weight of her utterance. She lifts a cigarette, takes a drag, and gently exhales. Stillness and lucidity in the face of evangelism. The shot fades into the next scene with an image of a steam-train as though it too is going up in a billow of smoke – as though the totality of

the film is determinately responsive to the force of one character's gesture. Stanwyck's screen charisma shines through here; it is at precisely this moment that our heroine attains to an indescribable yet signature coolness that elevates her status beyond the narrative frame, as well as making her by far the more commanding presence of the pair depicted in this shot. With such an effortlessly scene-stealing performance, which completely inverts the power imbalance encoded by the framing and the blocking and the dialogue, the film itself enacts precisely what one of its characters has just been preaching. Here Nietzsche's philosophy shapes visual style no less than explicit narrative content.

Lily Powers' name thus takes on the force of nominal determinism. As this early scene makes perfectly clear, hers is a fully realized will to power: *der Wille zur Macht*. Her subsequent quest is motivated by what Nietzsche would describe as the abolition of a sentimental human self and the new being's simultaneous creation of the world in its own image. 'Exploitation,' claims Nietzsche, 'does not belong to a corrupted or imperfect, primitive society: it belongs to the essence of being alive as a fundamental organic function; it is a result of genuine will to power, which is just the will of life' (2002, p. 153). By exploiting her own sexuality and that of her devotees, Lily makes herself into Hollywood's first self-conscious representation of the Nietzschean superhuman. But without this opening dialogue that inauguration might have gone unrecognized. In the theatrical cut, nothing is said of slaves and masters, or of the will to power, and instead the cobbler's speech refers precisely to the moral economy that Nietzsche's philosophy sought to overturn. 'But there is a right way and a wrong way,' he cautions Lily on her pursuit of autonomy. 'Remember, the price of the wrong way is too great.' In the theatrical version, by way of contrast to the original cut, the cobbler's speech incongruously submits the will to power to moral judgment. 'Be clean, be strong, defiant, and you will be a success.' Hollywood was not so far beyond good and evil after all.

This early scene is not the only one that was tampered with or eliminated for theatrical release. In the restored film, Lily continues to study Nietzsche and uses his philosophy as a guide for life in moments of crisis. Immediately before she causes and is witness to the climactic murder-suicide, a package arrives sent by the cobbler: a copy of Nietzsche's *Thoughts out of Season*, which has since been retranslated under the more familiar title *Untimely Mediations*. Lily's reading repeats the shot from earlier, looking closely at the book's spine before opening its pages. The film gives us an extreme close-up on the text. There are three paragraphs on screen, but the middle one is lit brighter, is free of optical distortion, and is bracketed off by the cobbler's hand-inked annotation. 'Face life as you find it,' we read with Lily, 'defiantly and unafraid. Waste

no energy yearning for the moon. Crush all sentiment.’ This too was cut from the released film. But more dramatic than the book’s elision is that the film itself indulges the very ideology that inspired such an edit. Specifically, a tacked-on ending, in which Lily begins to contemplate bailing out the bank and saving her moribund husband, seems a pre-emptive effort to make the film more palatable. Indeed, it reframes Lily as an affectionately submissive woman and it does so through what feels like unmerited sentimentalism. Jeanine Basinger describes it with sufficient incredulity: ‘Throughout this film, there has been no indication that Stanwyck is the woman she becomes in the final five minutes’ (quoted in Foster, 2006, p. 101). And so it is that Lily’s unique tale is unsuccessfully folded back into the cultural logics of domesticity and the financial imperatives of the market. 1930s Hollywood just couldn’t handle the philosophical overman, let alone the unashamedly promiscuous overwoman. Nietzsche’s time had not yet come.

### The Bathos of Philosophy Bros.

‘But I want to expose your hiding places to the light; therefore I laugh into your face my laughter of the heights’ (2006, p. 76). So quips Zarathustra, fuming against the prophets of so-called equality. Nietzsche similarly promotes his own philosophical method, *die fröhliche wissenschaft* or the gay science. ‘Perhaps laughter,’ he writes, ‘will then have formed an alliance with wisdom; perhaps only “gay science” will remain’ (2001, pp. 27–28). If, as John Lippitt is right to insist, Nietzsche “awards laughter a status higher than that granted by any other philosopher” (1992, p. 39), that could be why the majority of his filmic cameos are from comedy, the cinematic mode or genre most preoccupied with laughter. Here books written by Nietzsche serve a specific purpose. They appear and reappear as symbolically charged props included primarily to satirize typically male readers. Indeed, the satire is caused by the failure of men to embrace their wills to power and enter the ranks of the prophesied *übermenschen*. To read Nietzsche here is to have one’s character mired in a laughable bathos – and, in the following three films, that bathos serves consistently as a force of vituperative emasculation. Perhaps this is why the laughter habitually emanates from a feminized perspective.

*A Fish Called Wanda* (John Cleese and Charles Crichton, 1988) gives us one of cinema’s great comedy villains in the figure of Otto West, an arms-dealer and hitman played by a moustachioed Kevin Kline. In his own mind, this ex-CIA psychopath is a man of learning and wisdom, an awe-inspiring intellectual, and in this capacity he promotes the idea of himself as a disciple of Nietzsche. Our introduction to Otto in the film’s opening minutes sees him fallen asleep with a ludicrously

oversized paperback print of *Beyond Good and Evil* spread across his chest. An alarm rings, Otto shoots it with a silenced pistol, takes a second to gather his thoughts, then returns to reading. This brief episode perfectly encapsulates the dichotomy of Otto's personality, which shuttles schizophrenically between intellectual pretension and explosive violence, with the latter invariably eclipsing the former. In short: despite his aspirations to intellectual authority, Otto is exceedingly and overwhelmingly stupid. On this point, Otto's increasingly estranged lover, played by Jamie Lee Curtis, delivers a deeply cutting excoriation.

OTTO: Don't call me stupid.

WANDA: Oh, right! To call you stupid would be an insult to stupid people! I've known sheep that could outwit you. I've worn dresses with higher IQs. But you think you're an intellectual, don't you, ape?

OTTO: Apes don't read philosophy.

WANDA: Yes they do, Otto. They just don't understand it.

This is more than just a criticism of Otto's pretentious reading habits. More pointedly, it is a criticism sourced in Otto's reading materials. 'What is the ape to man?' asks Zarathustra. 'A laughing stock or a painful embarrassment. And that is precisely what the human shall be to the overman: a laughing stock or a painful embarrassment' (2006, p. 6). Otto is, despite all his efforts to the contrary, a source of dim-witted hilarity. That his lover knows this and that she knows it on the terms set by Otto's intellectual idol is what makes the exchange so cutting. It's also what makes their dialogue so hilarious.

In *Clueless* (1995), Amy Heckerling's mock-up of Jane Austen's *Emma*, Josh Lucas is the stepbrother and eventual romantic interest of the teenaged socialite Cher. When he returns from college to the ultra-affluent Beverly Hills his stepsister finds him pouring over Nietzsche's collected works. Here, the college student's sartorial nihilism – black shirt, black jacket, black shades – is undercut by the poolside setting in Beverly Hills. Josh reclines on a sunlounge before a wall of cascading fountains. Everything about the setting screams bourgeois decadence. While the shot zooms in on Josh, Alicia Silverstone's Cher speaks on the soundtrack. 'A licensed driver with nothing to do. Where would I find such a loser?' Cher punctually appears over the apparent loser's left shoulder, with both of their faces framed in union by the open book.

CHER: Hey, granola breath, you got something on your chin.

JOSH: I'm growing a goatee.

CHER: Well that's good. You don't want to be the last one at the coffee house without chin pubes.

Their physical proximity and the dialogic frisson together encode something of the quasi-incestuous agon that will eventually blossom into romance. And while that romance is only enabled by a shift in the perceptions of intellectual capital – when Cher turns out to be much cleverer than anyone suspected – here that shift is working in the opposite direction, via the stripping down of Josh's intellectual pretension. Just imagine what the philosopher would have made of this. In fact, Nietzsche once wrote about a comparable setting. 'At the sight of a waterfall we think we see in the countless curvings, twistings and breakings of the waves capriciousness and freedom of will; but everything here is necessary, every motion mathematically calculable' (1996, p. 57). As Cher so clearly knows: Josh is nothing but a cliché, the living capitulation to a preordained lifestyle: a coffee house intellectual or klatch philosopher. The poolside setting with its manufactured waterfall only accentuates this truth.

And finally, in *Little Miss Sunshine* (Jonathan Dayton and Valerie Faris, 2006) the maudlin Dwayne Hoover is committed to a vow of silence in teenage rebellion against his thoroughly dysfunctional family. Surely it is not without significance that Dwayne is played by the most resplendently ineffectual of all working actors, namely Paul Dano. His character in this film is the very embodiment of adolescent impotence: from the way he slouches from scene to scene, through the vacantly slack-jawed expression he wears at almost all times, right down to the mop of dyed-black hair. That Dwayne and his vow of silence are shaped by Nietzsche is suggested by the character's introduction, in which the scrawny teenager lifts a barbell, skips, and performs crunches, push-ups, and chin-ups all under the watchful eyes of the philosopher, whose roughly painted visage decorates one wall of Dwayne's bedroom. The next time we see Dwayne he is reading a Penguin Classics edition of *Zarathustra*, a book profoundly and paradoxically interested in silence. 'It is my favourite malice and art that my silence has learned not to betray itself through silence,' claims the eponymous prophet. And silence is, for Nietzsche, a defensive gesture used to shore up the will against its potential assailants. 'To prevent anyone from looking down into my ground and ultimate will, I invented my long bright silence' (2006, p. 139). The suggestion of Nietzschean influence is soon confirmed through a conversation with his uncle, Frank, the despairing Proust scholar played with abundant warmth by Steve Carell. Frank, sitting on a cot in Dwayne's bedroom, asks why his nephew refuses to speak. 'You can talk you just choose not to?' Dwayne replies by looking left and pointing. The camera pans from Frank's perspective to focus on the painting of Nietzsche. Black brushstrokes make up eyebrows, nose, and moustache. 'Is that Nietzsche?' Frank condescends, gently. 'You don't speak because of Friedrich Nietzsche.' Dwayne drops his head

and shuffles off down the hallway. There is nothing malicious or bright about this gesture. It feels weak and comes across as petulant at best. Another emasculation, this time performed not by the woman but instead the effeminate uncle.

### Imperfect Crimes and Criminal Hubris

If, under the sign of comedy, books written by Nietzsche appear as satirical props designed to emasculate their readers, in other genres we encounter characters that claim to live according to Nietzsche – to have read, internalized, and embodied his philosophy – and with alarming recidivism these characters find themselves slaked in blood and mired with death. The popular conception of Nietzsche as synonymous with terror and violence reaches something like its cinematic apotheosis in any number of action films, but especially in *Conan the Barbarian* (John Milius, 1982), an ultra-violent sword-and-sandals blockbuster that served amongst other things to provide the breakthrough role for Arnold Schwarzenegger. This film opens with an epigraph attributed to Nietzsche. ‘That which does not kill us makes us stronger – Friedrich Nietzsche,’ reads text made up of what appears to be molten steel. Revealingly, these words do not belong to Nietzsche – who coined the phrase ‘what does not kill me makes me stronger’ (2005, p. 157) – but, rather, they are from a paraphrase by G. Gordon Liddy, assistant to Richard Nixon. While this Reagan-era epic champions the full-blooded rage of an Aryan superman (against black antagonists, no less) the rampant conservatism encoded therein only echoes for an American audience the openly fascist interpretation of Nietzsche promoted by its German precursors.

Writing against the historical subsumption of Nietzsche into Hitler’s ideological apparatus, George Bataille offers the clearest warning against reductive misinterpretations of Nietzschean philosophy. ‘Were it not for the habitual jeering at Nietzsche,’ he argues, ‘the transforming of Nietzsche into what most depressed him (a rapid reading, a facile use, made without even rejecting positions inimical to him), his doctrine would be grasped for what it is: the fiercest of solvents’ (1997, p. 334). This is why, despite their titular invocations of the will, no film by Leni Riefenstahl should ever be considered properly Nietzschean, for Riefenstahl’s propaganda isolates certain ideas and promotes them with little regard for the contradictory whole of Nietzsche’s philosophy. By allying themselves with the Nazi death cult these films neglect that a will to power is first and foremost a will to life. ‘To make him the collaborator in causes devalored by his thought,’ insists Bataille, ‘is to trample upon it, to prove one’s ignorance even as one pretends to care for that thought’ (1997, p. 334). While action films and propaganda reels might be guilty of turning



Nietzsche against himself to produce a philosophy of terror, it is this very interpretation and the threat it conveys to which cinematic thrillers are intensely alive. Specifically, to read Nietzsche in a thriller is to promote an awareness of the violence that obtains within an ultimately hubristic interpretation – one whose interpreters claim to have closed the gap between their human selves and their superhuman ideals.

Alfred Hitchcock's *Rope* (1948) has its factual basis in real events. In May 1924 two students at the University of Chicago – Nathan Leopold and Richard Loeb – kidnapped and murdered a fourteen year-old boy, Robert Franks. Their motivation was a shared delusion of having attained the status of *übermenschen*, men whose transcendent superiority was believed to exempt them from the laws and rules that bind the human populace. In Hitchcock's film, an affluent homosexual couple strangle a former classmate in their Manhattan apartment. They conceal his body in a chest, which is then used as the centrepiece for a dinner party whose guests include their victim's closest acquaintances. Adapted from a book with the same title and loosely based on the Leopold and Loeb case, the film makes clear that the two murderers, Brandon and Phillip, are taking their cues from a reading of Nietzsche. As with Leopold and Loeb, Brandon and Phillip's intent is to demonstrate their stature as overmen by committing the perfect murder. They believe that murder, for the man of superior intellect and culture, is not a crime but an art. So Brandon explains to his guests in what might be described as a confession without content, for only Phillip is aware of the act to which these words refer. 'Good and evil and right and wrong were invented for the ordinary, average man – the inferior man – because they need them.' These weakly performed ideas are a second-hand reading of Nietzsche inherited without question from Rupert Cadell – played by James Stewart – who was once the prep-school housemaster of both the murderers and their victim. It is only after the party, when Brandon and Phillip prepare to dispose of the body, that Cadell returns and uses flattery to outwit a confession from the egomaniacal Brandon.

In his psychoanalytic interpretation of the film, Slavoj Žižek insists that we view *Rope* as a failure because it is unable to fully confront the horror of its violence, which he rightly insists cannot be separated from that of the Nazis in Germany. The film's misguided thesis, he argues, is that when Rupert is finally 'confronted with the literal realization of his doctrine – when, following the Lacanian definition of communication, he gets back from the other his own message in its inverted, true form – he is shaken and shrinks back from the consequence of his words,' but at this moment he is unwilling to recognize the murderous deed as the logical outcome of his teachings (1992, pp. 42–43). The temptation here is to

align the film itself with Cadell, giving Stewart's genially eccentric character the final word on its fictional universe, but instead – and contra Žižek – all of this must be appreciated within the formal conceit that frames it. Famously, Hitchcock set out to shoot the whole of *Rope* in a single unbroken long take. While the realization of this ambition would have been impossible due to unassailable material constraints, not least of which is the length of film stock and the size of projection reels, the completed film nevertheless comprises only ten shots joined together almost seamlessly by surreptitious edits. The formal constraint impresses not only as a gimmicky obstruction but also because of the serious demands it places on both the camera and the actors to spatially negotiate a small, overpopulated, and densely furnished set. The ingenious dexterity of the camerawork matches the social game performed by Brandon. It is thus that form and content mutually reflect to produce a recursive vision of an ultimately flawed exactitude: the imperfect shot for the imperfect crime. 'Mankind,' claims Zarathustra, 'is a rope fastened between animal and overman – a rope over an abyss' (2006, p. 7). With Hitchcock's flawed film the rope has frayed and man is given over to his abyssal plummet. Perhaps it is this easy analogy between form and style, between how the film is shot and the crypto-fascist designs of its murderers, which informed Hitchcock's eventual censure of it as an unforgivable failure. So he would confess to François Truffaut: 'I really don't know how I came to indulge in it' (1983, p. 179).

Though *Rope* might be exceptional in its extended treatment and interrogation of the hubris belonging to self-proclaimed *übermenschen*, it is not alone in casting such philosophically deluded characters as murderers. In television, too, Nietzschean killers run rampant – but this is to be expected, given that crime thrillers have always preferred a serial format. Here we can look at two recent televisual exemplars from either side of the Atlantic. The cosmically gothic first season of *True Detective* is more in tune with the outright pessimism of Nietzsche's forbear, Arthur Schopenhauer, than with Nietzsche's own critique of nihilism. Nevertheless, at key moments its debt to Nietzsche is articulated through characters' misinterpretation of eternal recurrence – which, as in Hitchcock's film, both leads to atrocity and is used to govern a formal conceit, in this case the doubling of events between two narrative temporalities so as to enforce a sense of repetitious cyclicity. In other words, the narrative is as much eternally recurrent as it is about the eternal return as a philosophical concept. 'Someone once told me time is a flat circle,' proclaims Matthew McConaughey's Rust Cohle. 'Everything we ever done or will do we gonna do over and over and over again.' Readers of philosophy will assume to know where Cohle

heard this, for these words echo a familiar simplification of Zarathustra's doctrine. But Zarathustra does not utter them. Instead, they are taken from a dwarf's interjection during the prophet's sermon. And, as Zarathustra reproaches, these words are pure hubris. 'You spirit of gravity!' he barks. 'Do not make it too easy on yourself!' (2006, p. 126). Though Cohle is very much a nihilist on the order of Zarathustra's dwarf – at one point another character calls him 'little priest' – that is not necessarily the textual origin of Cohle's paraphrase. Cohle only repeats these words when recounting an assault on the meth lab run by Reggie Ledoux, a tattoo-stained pederast and butcher of children. 'You'll do this again,' draws Ledoux into the afternoon sun when captured and held at gunpoint. 'Time is a flat circle.' To which Cohle replies, pistol cocked: 'What is that? Nietzsche? Shut the fuck up.' Here, moments before his execution, Ledoux finds absolution for unspeakable crimes in an appropriation of Nietzsche's thought. But naturally enough, the eternal return is a concept that will recur at least once more in the series, during our introduction to the story's true antagonist, the polymath serial murderer Errol Childress. In his case, however, mass murder is conceived of as a means to escape the eternal return. It serves as a way out. 'My ascension,' he claims, 'my ascension removes me from the disc and the loop.'

Similarly, cat-and-mouse procedural *The Fall* features a serial killer who communicates with the investigating constabulary almost exclusively through Nietzschean philosophy. After a series of strangulations in Belfast, Ireland, Metropolitan Police Superintendent Stella Gibson – played by Gillian Anderson – takes lead of the strained investigation. The murderer, whom we are made to know from the very start of the series, is Paul Spector, who by day acts as a bereavement counsellor and family man. This narrative derives much of its energy from two seemingly incompatible relationships: between Spector and Gibson, on the one hand, and between Spector and his family, on the other. It is, however, in the chiasmic bond between the two relationships that Nietzsche is brought to fore, specifically in an act of remorse that unites both sides of Spector's personality: the pitiless murderer and the caring father. After learning that a victim was pregnant he composes a letter of apology to her father including a line from *Zarathustra*. Gibson, who immediately recognizes the phrase, has an investigative assistant read from the line's textual source. The shortened text, delivered with an in Irish inflection, is this:

I say unto you: one must still have chaos in oneself to be able to give birth to a dancing star. Alas, the time of the most despicable man is coming, he that is no longer able to despise himself. Behold! I show you the last man. "What is love? What is creation? What is longing? What is a star?" – thus asks the last man and blinks.

But Spector is not and cannot be the father of chaos to which he so clearly aspires, and this is not only because his homicidal obsession runs against the affirmation of life and neither is it because of his biological gender; moreover, and so much more prosaically, he cannot give birth to chaos because of his abiding commitment to domestic and professional order: he is the superlatively orderly middle-class subject, a despicable 'last man.' This fact is made even more obvious by contrast with his opposite number, Gibson, whose embodiment of the feminist ideal guides her against both the domestic and professional constraints that bind her antithesis, and whose manifest will to power leads her to the preservation and betterment of life as opposed to its extinguishment. Unlike him, she knows love, creation, and longing. But he fails to recognize this. 'We're very alike, you and me,' he tells her over the phone in the first season's finale. 'Both driven by will to power. A desire to control everything and everyone. Obsessive. Ruthless. Living and breathing moral relativism. It's just you're bound by conventional notions of right and wrong.' She fires back a scathing riposte: 'You're a slave to your desires. You have no control at all. You're weak. Impotent.' She sees through misogynistic egoism and the hubris of recruiting Nietzsche into such a pitiful worldview. 'Is that really why you called me,' she asks, 'to expound some half-baked philosophy?' Here Nietzsche's philosophy resides in the duality of character as its two embodying opposites are drawn together by the gravitational pull of apotheosis. Yet of course, the philosophical valence of their antagonism should have been expected all along, given this story appears to be another case of nominal determinism: his name suggests only death whereas hers posits an affinity with the stars.

### **Animal Vigour and the Moving Image**

Everything we have encountered so far indicates less a scepticism directed at Nietzsche's own views on the will to power, the superhuman, and the eternal return, and more a critical perspective on Nietzsche's variously devout readers: in one genre, satirically emphasizing the aspirational divide between characters and their ideals; and, in the other, amplifying the violence that attends a hubristic simplification and over-identification with Nietzschean doctrine. The question so far has therefore been one of reception and its subjective activation. The aesthetic intensity and historical repetition with which this question is posed results primarily from the philosopher's unique absorption into popular thought, which in itself has become a topic of political if not philosophical debate. This is part of what Alain Badiou is suggesting when he reads Nietzsche as an 'anti-philosopher,' a figure who 'opposes, to the speculative nihilism of philosophy, the completely affirmative necessity of an act,' and

whose achievement is therefore in the lived embodiment of its reception as opposed to its existence as mere interpretation, analysis, and theory (2011, p. 1). Exceptionally, Nietzsche's philosophy wants for reckoning beyond the philosopher's tower.

That want, which is given formal and thematic expression all throughout Nietzsche's oeuvre, translates into a way of writing about film that breaks with some of the prevalent academic formulas. If, as is generally recognized, the two major figures in the film-philosophical turn are Stanley Cavell and Gilles Deleuze, there may well be a tension between the scholarship informed and inspired by those two and scholarship that maintains a fidelity to Nietzsche's ambitions. This is because Cavell and Deleuze are both systematic thinkers whose writings on cinema tend to reflect as much, whereas it is precisely against philosophical systems that Nietzsche implores rebellion. 'I distrust all systematizers and avoid them,' he claims. 'The will to a system is a lack of integrity' (2005, p. 159). Whether or not we agree with this provocation – though some of the films we have just seen certainly might – the fact remains that such distrust clearly underwrote the composition of Nietzsche's books and the formation of his project on the whole. Here form and content are consonant in their ideation. As Jacques Derrida would eventually put it: 'there is no totality to Nietzsche's text, not even a fragmentary or aphoristic one' (1979, p. 135). Nietzsche's unique style of writing, his deliberate presentational method, is one that might yet lend itself to an affirmative mode of film criticism. 'In the mountains,' Zarathustra tells us, 'the shortest way is from peak to peak, but for that one must have long legs' (2006: 28). While the present survey can be fairly accused of abjuring deep or sustained analysis of any one film, or of avoiding conventional argumentative structure, that is only because its author wants film-philosophy to follow Nietzsche, at least for this brief outing, and enjoy a long-legged dash across the mountaintops – or if not in the mountains then at least through the multiplex.

And yet, the big question remains unanswered: why should cinematic narrative be so frequently preoccupied with Nietzsche to begin with? One reason is that cinema itself might be the privileged medium for developing a properly Nietzschean aesthetic. If – as D. N. Rodowick argues after Deleuze – cinema is a singularly well-equipped host of life-affirming vitality, perhaps this medium will be site for a will to power, for what Rodowick describes as 'a blossoming, ascendant life, capable of transforming itself in cooperation with the forces it encounters, composing with them an ever growing power, "always increasing the power to live, always open to new possibilities"' (2010, p. 103). Or perhaps, in its capacity as a popular successor to opera, cinema might even

fulfil the promise made to a young Nietzsche by Richard Wagner in Bayreuth: it may well be a form 'whose problems are abbreviations of the endlessly complex calculus of human action and desire,' a form 'able to produce the appearance of a simpler world, a shorter solution to the riddle of life' (1997, p. 213). Tom Cohen once pursued that very argument, updating Wagner for the age of mechanical reproducibility. 'Cinema,' he claims, 'seems heir to the *Gesamtkunstwerk* whose operative version was Nietzsche's "MacGuffin" or pretext for writing *The Birth*, particularly if we replace *Kunst* with *Technik*' (2009, p. 149). My sense, however, is that all of this will need some secure basis in the text itself, in Nietzsche's philosophy and its written articulation, and there we find at least one prefiguration of cinematic technology.

In his late notebooks, in an entry written sometime in the autumn of 1887, Nietzsche offers a superlatively powerful vision of the aesthetic regime's potential. He tells us what the artwork is really good for:

Art reminds us of states of animal vigor; it's on the one hand a surplus and overflow of flourishing corporeality into the world of images and wishes; on the other a rousing of the animal function through images and wishes of intensified life - a heightening of the feeling of life, a stimulus for it. (2003, p. 160).

One can easily imagine an affirmation of cinema made along these lines: of film, whose predicate in animation makes it the very art of animal movement, and whose unique goal is to vitalize the world of images as its own flourishing corporeality. In this sense, we might suggest that film is in itself Nietzschean; or, more accurately, that Nietzsche's vision of art is pre-cinematic, anachronistically articulating a premonition of the future technology. If this is true, further questions abound. What might a Nietzschean film look like? How might a film make good on these aspects of its own apparatus? Do such films exist? While the examples we have looked at so far are more interested in the reception of Nietzsche's philosophy, numerous other films commit themselves to the construction and elaboration of a properly Nietzschean vision using the technical means specific to the medium.

Of course, that vision is what we might expect – to open a brief parenthesis – from the inhuman formalism of cartoon animation, either with its hand-drawn cells or its digitally rendered pixels. The exemplary television series here would be *Adventure Time* (Pendleton Ward, 2010), a post-apocalyptic saga set in the magical Land of Ooo. After the apparent heat death of humankind, characters nevertheless continue to read Nietzsche: the vermiform students of Worm College attend classes on 'Theoretical Fightonomics' and speculate on hypothetical duels

between Nietzsche's *übermensch* and the cybernetic Mandroid; and, in another episode, the Ice King gives existentialism a whole new layer of meta-resonance by concealing a 'Nihilism Funnies' comic strip within a much weightier tome, *The Lighter Side of Nietzsche*. These references inform a narrative whose heroic duo, Jake the Dog and Finn the Human, are the manifestly triumphant realizations of Nietzschean spirit. Jake's shape-shifting 'stretchy powers' render him animation incarnate, capable of infinite self-invention. And Finn – the nominally last human in Ooo, an inveterate man of action – is eventually revealed to be the rebirth of a sentient comet: he is quite literally Zarathustra's dancing star. But, closing this parenthesis almost as soon as it opened, it will not be cartoon animation but motion capture, either through causal-indexical film imaging or micro-indexical digitalism, that shall serve as our privileged medium here. This is because cinema in that more traditional sense is not just animate but also animates the erstwhile human subject, a figure that, in Nietzsche's philosophy, is a necessary stepping stone – a transitory thing to be overcome on the uncharted path to immortality. So Deleuze once remarked on Fritz Lang, in such a way that suggests the importance of motion capture to the present argument: 'if the human body enters directly into these "geometrical groupings,"' he argues on the architecture of expressionism, 'it is because all difference between the mechanical and the human has dissolved, but this time to the advantage of the potent non-organic life of things' (1986, p. 52). Moving away from cartoon animation and back to motion capture, I want to gesture toward three well-known films, all of which give form to that inhuman advantage, before describing the philosophical vocation shared between them.

The most famous film to productively engage Nietzsche is Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968). At the level of explicit citation the film's celebrated opening sequence, in which the sun gradually illuminates the earth's curvature, is scored to the thunderous timpani of Richard Strauss' musical adaptation of *Zarathustra*, from which the film takes its worldview. This is a film whose narrative literalizes the idea of humankind as a transitory conduit between the ape and some unknowable, future being: which is eventually revealed as the appallingly kitsch Star Child. Andrei Tarkovsky's *Sacrifice* (*Offret*, 1986) is about Alexander, a middle-aged nihilist who in a supreme act of bad faith attempts to bargain with God to prevent an imminent nuclear holocaust. The film's opening long take features a conversation between Alexander and the postman about the dwarf from part three of *Zarathustra*, a figure that famously necessitates the fullest articulation of the eternal return; and, thereafter, the film stages Alexander's willful self-transfiguration. His is an existential journey that reaches its climax in the conflagration



of an old house, the kind of architectural structure which in almost all of Tarkovsky's late-career films serves as an emblem of the past's recurrence and which in this instance emblemizes the eradication of Alexander's bourgeois values. And finally, transplanting a Tarkovsky-esque house into a whole new setting and genre, Lars von Trier's *Antichrist* (2009) is, like Nietzsche's text from which it borrows its title, a hymn to the untamed force of nature. It is a pronouncement of the fact that – to recall only the film's best-known line, which is delivered by a self-mutilating ouroboros, a grisly embodiment of the eternal return – 'Chaos reigns.'

But all of that is to speak exclusively and expeditiously about narrative figuration. What these three films – *2001*, *The Sacrifice*, and *Antichrist* – also have in common is an aesthetic commitment to anti-humanism, which they register not only in their narratives but also with the technical apparatus of cinema as form. Their success in translating Nietzsche onto the screen results in a narrative anti-humanism which, crucially in every case, is transposed into a visual style, so that the frame itself contributes to the cancelling out of human sentimentality and affirming, in its place, the otherworldly and immortal subjectivity of the superhuman. In all three cases, the human subject is simultaneously outrivaled and transformed by some terrifyingly superior force that registers itself on the film's technical apparatus as a revision to the methods of motion capture – be it extra-terrestrial space, extinction of the species, or the potency of untrammelled nature. That is what we encounter in Kubrick's celestial travelling shots, in Tarkovsky's haunted long takes, and in von Trier's world-warping lens distortions. At a stylistic level, these films all heighten the feeling of life precisely by eclipsing its humanity with something far greater than itself. In that capacity, theirs is a shared aesthetic of the sublime – but not in the quasi-votive Kantian sense. Here we are asked to recognize, as Nietzsche did in Wagner, 'something sublime and significant' that adheres between 'the rhythm of grand passion and in its victim,' between that which we are and that which we are yet to become (1997, p. 212).

### Béla Tarr's Final Affirmation

And this, the thwarting of humanity in the name of its own transcendence, is precisely where the handful of biopics that attempt to dramatize the life and times of Friedrich Nietzsche all fail to make good on his philosophy or to actualize as real art by that philosophy's standard. These films are all genuflectingly committed to the human subject, that human all too human in its manifestly stupid frailty, registering the philosopher's story generically as melodrama while making a fetish of his eventual descent into madness. If, by contrast to such biopic flaccidity, a Nietzschean



film is to affirm life both through 'a surplus and overflow of flourishing corporeality into the world of images and wishes,' and through 'a rousing of the animal function through images and wishes of intensified life,' that film would have to transcend the human subject – the privileged figure of all narrative cinema – and deliver visual sequences that articulate a passage between the animals we humans were and the beings into which we might someday evolve. Of course, this talk of humans and animals will recall Nietzsche's own maximally human episode, that moment in Turin whose numerous retellings range from the political modernism of Joseph Conrad through the incipit whimsy of Milan Kundera. It was Roland Barthes who, when rounding out a reflection on the emotional gravity of photographic and cinematic images, asked us to recall 'what is dead, what is going to die, as Nietzsche did when, as Podach tells us, on January 3, 1889, he threw himself in tears on the neck of a beaten horse: gone mad for Pity's sake' (1981, p. 34). And it is this Nietzsche, the pitiful and pitiable lunatic, which the philosophy wants to abolish. It is also such a view of cinema – what Laura Mulvey would call 'death 24 times a second' (2006, p. 15) – which the philosophy would have us recalibrate transversely for an affirmation of life.

Béla Tarr's final film, *The Turin Horse* (*A Torinói Ló*, 2011), is not about Nietzsche in any conventional sense but instead uses the story of his collapse to occasion its long journey into the night. The story of Nietzsche is given as a voice-over monologue on a black screen, as an epigraph that bears repetition in full:

In Turin on the 3rd of January 1889, Friedrich Nietzsche steps out of the doorway of number six, Via Carlo Albert, perhaps to take a stroll, perhaps to go by the post office to collect his mail. Not far from him, the driver of a hansom cab is having trouble with a stubborn horse. Despite all his urging, the horse refuses to move, whereupon the driver - Giuseppe? Carlo? Ettore? - loses his patience and takes his whip to it. Nietzsche comes up to the throng and puts an end to the brutal scene caused by the driver, by this time foaming at the mouth with rage. For the solidly built and full-moustached gentleman suddenly jumps up to the cab and throws his arms around the horse's neck, sobbing. His landlord takes him home, he lies motionless and silent for two days on a divan until he mutters the obligatory last words 'Mutter, ich bin dumm!' and lives for another ten years, silent and demented, under the care of his mother and sisters. We do not know what happened to the horse.

While the film's stormbound anti-narrative will subsequently stir with a host of Nietzschean shadows whose appearances augur the end of our species, it is the very first shot, the image onto which this epigraph opens,

that most forcefully bespeaks an immanent film-philosophy. Everything about the shot conveys animate and animal motility. It comprises a long take of the beleaguered workhorse, which hales its cab and cabman down a dirt road flanked by lifeless trees and blasted by windblown debris. Amphoric noise doubles a threnody built in the dissonance between a sighing string section and grinding barrel organ. The camera pulls ahead of the horse as though driven backward by its momentum. It swoops under the horse's immense, black face, then pulls back out and arcs around its body to capture gashes carved into fur and flesh; it zooms slowly onto the cabman at the reigns, pulls back alongside the horse with which it turns a bend, and then dollies further backward; the horse and cab are almost lost in the glaucoma of swirling mists, but the camera surges forward again, capturing the horse side-on and barely visible in the darkling light: by the shot's end, over four minutes since it began, the horse is only a silhouette of black on grey, pulling further and further ahead into the unknown lands of an imperceptible future, to which we of the camera have turned our backs. There is nothing sentimental about this opening with its refusal to indulge the falsities of sympathetic identification. Instead, the horse serves as an avatar for the cinematic apparatus: it shares its movement with that of the camera and is just as much a thing of light contrast as the shot that frames it, all of which is bound together in the unswerving actuality of the long take. 'And it is true that the great difficulty for us all, that which demands of us creation, is not to discover and to understand Nietzsche. The difficulty is to know, philosophically, how to lose him' (2011, p. 10). This, for Badiou, is the truth of Nietzsche. Such difficulty in loss is also what we are seeing in this shot, while the camera looks backward toward the philosopher's city, a fateful site which has since vanished over the horizon and into the past. Nevertheless, the backward glance is what allows us to apprehend the journey forward, as though the movement of a horse and of its cinematic double could not be seen until the human subject is transcended; as though the combined inhumanity of the animal and its animation could not be affirmed until Nietzsche had been left behind to his insanity on the street of Turin.

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